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Kamala Harris breaks barriers as America's vice president

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Body

WASHINGTON - Kamala Harris made history on Wednesday when she was sworn in as Joe Biden's vice president, becoming the first woman, the first Black American and the first Asian American to hold the second highest U.S. office.

Looking ahead, Harris, 56, is seen as an obvious contender for the Democratic Party's 2024 presidential nomination should Biden, 78, decide not to seek a second term. Harris has yet to weigh in publicly on such speculation.

A U.S. senator from California the past four years, Harris has shattered many a glass ceiling. She served as San Francisco's first female district attorney and was California's first woman of color to be elected attorney general.

Harris has resigned her Senate seat, but she still will play a prominent role in the chamber. The U.S. vice president serves as Senate president, casting any tie-breaking votes in the 100-member chamber. With it split evenly between Democrats and Republicans, Harris gives her party control of the Senate.

Her background in criminal justice could help the new Biden administration tackle the issues of racial equality and policing after the country was swept by protests last year. She is expected to be a top adviser on judicial nominations.

Harris is the daughter of immigrants, with her mother coming to the United States from India and her father from Jamaica.

She had her sights set on becoming the first woman U.S. president when she competed against Biden and others for their party's 2020 nomination. Harris dropped out of the race after a campaign hurt by her wavering views on healthcare and indecision about embracing her past as a prosecutor.

Biden looked beyond some of the harsh words she had for him in that campaign to name Harris as his running mate last August. She has proven to be a valuable and polished stand-in, appealing especially to women, liberals and voters of color.

Harris developed a deep fundraising network during her Senate and White House bids. She was instrumental to Biden's raking in record sums of money in the closing months of the campaign against Republican incumbent Donald Trump. Her selection sparked a burst of excitement in the Democratic voter base and among the party's donors.

A TEAM PLAYER

Kamala Harris breaks barriers as America's vice president

Accusations from liberals that Harris did not do enough to investigate police shootings and wrongful conviction cases when she was California's attorney general helped doom her own presidential run but surfaced little during her time as Biden's running mate.

Harris defended her record, saying she had worked her whole career "to reform the criminal justice system with the understanding that it is deeply flawed and in need of repair."

Prior to her selection, several Biden aides said Harris was able to put to rest concerns among some in the former vice president's camp that she would be too personally ambitious to make a trustworthy partner.

"Joe and I were raised in a very similar way," Harris said of Biden at her October debate against then-Vice President Mike Pence. "We were raised with values that are about hard work, about the value and the dignity of public service and about the importance of fighting for the dignity of all people."

DOUBLE DUTY

Harris juggled her running mate duties with her day job in the Senate. Befitting her background as a prosecutor, she was a deft cross-examiner of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett at Barrett's Senate confirmation hearing in October, weaving Biden's campaign message on healthcare and climate change into her line of questioning.

As the Senate's only Black woman, Harris emerged as a leading voice on racial justice and police reform after Minneapolis police killed African-American man George Floyd in May. She marched with protesters on the streets of Washington and won over some liberal skeptics.

Asked on the CBS program "60 Minutes" last year why, given Biden's age, he believed Harris would be ready to step into the presidency if something happened to him, Biden rapidly fired off five reasons.

"Number one, her values. Number two, she is smart as a devil, and number three, she has a backbone like a ramrod. Number four, she is really principled. And number five, she has had significant experience in the largest state in the union in running the justice department that's only second in size to the United States Justice Department. And obviously, I hope that never becomes a question," Biden said.

Harris is married to attorney Douglas Emhoff, who has adopted the Twitter handle @SecondGentleman. His two children from a previous marriage refer to their stepmother as "Momala."

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